DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 101 PS 020 696

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TITLE	The Efficacy of a Head Start Educational Program for Parents Identified as Potential Child Abusers.
PUB DATE	27 Mar 92
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Southern Association on Children Under Six (Tulsa, OK, March 23-28, 1992).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Abuse; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Education; Parenting Skills; *Parents; Preschool Children; Pretests Posttests; *Prevention; *Program Effectiveness; Time Factors (Learning)
IDENTIFIERS	Child Abuse Potential Inventory; Project Head Start

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study conducted to determine if parents' enrollment in a Head Start Resource Center for Parents and Children reduced the parents' potential for child abuse. Subjects were 17 mothers who were enrolled in the Resource Center, had a child from 2 to 4 years old, and were identified as potential child abusers. The Resource Center's educational program was based on Belsky's ecological model of child maltreatment. This model suggests that factors involving parents and children interact and, in some combinations, may cause child maltreatment. In the study, subjects were divided into first- and second-year participants in the educational program. Subjects in the second-year group participated in the program, were tested for abuse potential using the Child Abuse Potential (CAP) Inventory, participated in the program again, and were tested again. Subjects in the first-year group were tested, participated in the program, and were tested again. A significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on the CAP Inventory for second-year, but not for first-year, participants was found. It is concluded that second-year parents benefited from the program and recommended that the two-year program should be continued. (HTH)

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The Efficacy of a Head Start Educational Program for Parents Identified as Potential Child Abusers

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Paper presented at the Southern Association On Children Under Six Annual Conference
Tulsa, OK, March 27, 1992

PS 020696

Child abuse is a complex, pervasive problem. One approach to the problem of violence in child rearing is through parent education. The social psychological framework of child maltreatment considers the interaction of individuals, each with their developmental background, and the total environment. This model was developed by Jay Belsky (1980) who drew on the work of Burgess, Tinbergen (1951, cited in Belsky, 1980), and Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979).

The purpose of my study was to determine if a Head Start Resource Center for Parents and Children reduced the parents' potential for child abuse as measured by the Child Abuse Potential (CAP) Inventory, weekly reports of stressful events, and Resource Center class closures.

The setting was a Resource Center for Parents and Children that was funded by a Head Start Expansion Grant. This was a multi-method program that addressed the needs of the entire family system at the ecological levels in order to reduce parents' potential to abuse children.

My sample consisted of 17 mothers enrolled in the Resource Center who met Head Start income guidelines, had a child two to four years old, and was identified as a potential child abuser. Eight mothers were in their first year of participation and nine mothers were in their second year of participation. Of these, 10 mothers were referred from health or social service agencies and 7 were self-referred, parents who recognized their own feelings of losing control. The mean age for first year parents was 27.6

years and for second year parents it was 25.7 years.

The educational program was based on Belsky's ecological model of child maltreatment. Briefly, this model suggests that nested factors interact and, in some combinations, may cause child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980; Watkins & Bradbard, 1982). The Resource Center addressed these factors for the parents through: (1) accepting the parents as persons but not their abusive behaviors; (2) identifying parents' strengths and needs and linking them to community resources; (3) providing child development information and helping parents realign their expectations of children; (4) training parents in non-violent discipline methods; (5) giving parents socialization opportunities; and (6) helping parents nullify and restructure myths and restructure family and cultural patterns. The Resource Center also worked with the children by providing Head Start classes as well as infant care during Resource Center meetings. In addition, health screenings and referrals for children birth to six years were provided.

The study design was a modification of Campbell's and Stanley's (1963) Recurrent Institutional Cycle design. In my study, participants were divided into groups of parents who were in their first and second years of Resource Center participation. The second year group had treatment, was tested, had treatment, and was tested again. The first year group was tested, had treatment, and was tested again. The first testing of the first year group served as the control group.

Cross-sectional comparisons measured the entire population at the same time, the beginning and ending of the program year. Each group had experienced different lengths of time in the program. Longitudinal comparisons measured the same group of persons at the beginning and ending of the program year.

Research Hypotheses and Questions

In looking at the Resource Center in light of Belsky's model, I formulated 3 research hypotheses and 3 research questions. The results of the research hypotheses are based on scores obtained from the Child Abuse Potential (CAP) Inventory. The CAP Inventory was designed to screen suspected physical child abusers but it has also been successfully used as a pretest-posttest instrument to assist in intervention/prevention program evaluation (Milner, 1986).

The CAP Inventory recognizes the relationship among personality traits and interpersonal problems (Milner, 1986). This, again, is an integrated approach to the problem of child maltreatment. The results of the 3 research questions are based on weekly class closures and weekly interviews in which parents reported stressful situations, coping strategies, and positive events.

Research Hypothesis One: Parents returning to the Resource Center will have lower CAP pretest and posttest Abuse scale score means than will newly enrolled parents. Result: This was simply

not the case. No significant differences on CAP Abuse scale score means existed between parents returning to the Resource Center for a second year and those entering for their first year of participation. Both groups had elevated pretest scores.

Research Hypothesis Two: New and returning parents will have lower Abuse scale score means at the completion of each respective educational series than at the beginning of the series. Result: There were no significant differences between pre- and posttest CAP Abuse scale score means for the first year parents. A significant difference was found for second year parents. At the end of the second year of participation, the Abuse scale score mean dropped from being elevated, indicating these parents possessed characteristics of known physical child abusers, to a more moderate level which no longer indicated abuser characteristics.

Research Hypothesis Three: Persons referred to the Resource Center by health and social service agencies will have a higher CAP Abuse scale score mean than persons who are self-referred. Result: The pretest score mean for agency-referred parents was both elevated, indicating the parents possessed abusive characteristics, and significantly different from self-referred parents who had a much lower score mean. No significant differences for posttest CAP score means were found between agency- and self-referred parents. The agency-referred parents' posttest score mean dropped 46 points but was still elevated.

Research Question One: Will reports by parents enrolled in

the Resource Center show changes in patterns of stressful events during the program year? Result: Parental reports showed no patterns of stressful events. When stressful incidents were divided into early, middle and late segments, each 10 weeks long, and the means for each segment calculated, no patterns were seen.

Research Question Two: Will interview data show differences in patterns of stressful events between self-referred parents and agency-referred parents? Result: I found that self-referred parents reported more stressful incidents in the early segment than in the middle or late segments. The number of stressful incidents for this group ranged freom 14 to 71. Agency-referred parents, however, reported progressively more stressful events during the time segments. The number of stressful events for this group ranged from 4 to 40.

Research Question Three: Will parents enrolled in the Resource Center use techniques learned in the educational program to reduce stressful events in their lives? Result: Class closures and reports by home visitors revealed most parents were using some of the techniques presented in the educational program. The extent to which the techniques were being used to reduce stressful situations was unclear.

Conclusions

Now to the conclusions.

1. Pretest CAP Inventory scores presented a picture of

Resource Center participants as having high potential to abuse.

2. Parents in the second year group had significant differences between pre- and posttest scores. Scores for the second year parents fell from an elevated position, indicating they possessed characteristics of known child abusers, to a non-elevated position. Results of analysis of the factor scales which influence the Abuse scale score showed the factors of distress and unhappiness were significantly reduced. For the second year group, the educational program seemed to be effective in reducing distress and unhappiness but not successful in reducing difficulties associated with rigidity. In addition, the program was not effective in reducing interactional problems.

Possible explanations for this conclusion were: second year parents had spent a longer time in the program but they had years of learned behaviors to overcome and this takes time. It may take them longer to establish trusting relationships. At some point in the program participants may "click in" and begin to benefit from the program. Two-thirds of the parents were single, giving them more control over discipline and eliminating spousal conflicts. These parents may have stayed in the program because of social support from the staff and participants. The second year curriculum required participants to plan a session; therefore, they may have had more of a sense of ownership and commitment.

3. Significant differences were found for agency- and self-referred parents on the CAP Inventory pretest. The pretest Abuse

scale score mean of agency-referred parents was elevated, indicating their potential to physically abuse their children, and significantly higher than that of the self-referred parents which was not elevated. Possible explanations for this conclusion concern the nature of the groups: the agency-referred parents were four years younger than the self-referred parents; three-fourths of the parents were single which meant they carried the whole burden of parenting, possibly making it more difficult to get away and to have some time for themselves; and, the agency-referred parents were urged to attend the Resource Center by agencies and, thus, may have lacked commitment to the program.

4. Interview data indicated extensive and severe problems in many areas of the parents' lives, an impression not seen through the Child Abuse Potential Inventory. These problems included financial, legal, employment, mental health, physical health and problems in social interactions.

5. Reports by parents and home visitors suggested that the classes provided parents with some useable ideas. The extent to which the parents used the activities and techniques was unclear.

Summary

In summary, this study attempted to determine if the educational program of the Resource Center reduced the participants' potential to abuse children. The findings suggest that second year parents appeared to benefit from the program,

indicating a program of at least two years' duration continue.

Although I must be cautious in forming conclusions and making recommendations, the findings suggest something I have not read anywhere in the literature. The length of program participation may be a key factor in prevention/intervention programs for child maltreatment. Head Start decided to not allow the second year parents to return for a third year of Resource Center participation. It would, however, be interesting to see if a third year would bring further reduction in Abuse scale score means. Furthermore, it would be interesting to follow the participants to see if their Abuse scale scores would return to elevated levels, stay at about the same level, or continue to decline.

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